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Honors, Professionalism, and Teaching and Learning: A Response to Certification

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Abstract: This essay responds to an argument for certification based on a particular sociological theory of professionalization. The case for certification rests on the supposition that honors has evolved from a nascent educational movement focused on distinct teaching and learning approaches for high-ability students to one that is now ready to professionalize in ways that require more specialization, organizational oversight, systematic evaluation, and exclusive credentialing through certification. The author suggests that honors is already a full-fledged professional endeavor, recognizing that the core emphasis on teaching and learning in honors is a genuinely professional endeavor when performed authentically in the experimental, creative, and subversive spirit that underlies honors pedagogy and that is shared with a community of scholars through professional activities and publications. Such a precedence is consistent with Ernest Boyer's reconsideration of the traditional "priorities of the professoriate," placing the kinds of pedagogical innovation, analysis, review, and distributed scholarship found in contemporary models of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and in honors on a par with the scholarly demands in recognized specific disciplines and in the professoriate at large. Using a contemporary lens that focuses on teaching and learning as a scholarly enterprise and recognizing that honors education has from its beginnings valorized the scholarship of teaching and learning, the author concludes that honors is a legitimate professional venture without the exclusive standardization of certification.

Keywords: professionalization; Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL); Boyer, Ernest L., 1928–1995; higher education; certification

My response to Patricia Smith's lead essay on the "Professionalization of Honors Education" brings mixed feelings. I have come to respect and applaud Smith's many contributions to our profession: her work on the value, history, and growth of honors; on topics such as demographics, quality assessment, selection and retention, and curriculum development; and on improving the process of program review in honors. Smith's work has helped to provide honors professionals with new and important scholarship in the field. I thus see Smith as a consummate professional in the field of honors. At the same time, however, I find her reliance on the sociological framework derived from Theodore Caplow, along with the insinuation that honors is an inadequate enterprise in need of professionalization, a troubling argument for a number of reasons. One unintended consequence, for instance, is the suggestion that neither she nor I nor any of us in honors is a legitimate professional if we take Caplow's theory seriously, and neither are our programs and colleges.

You may have noticed that I have loaded the first paragraph with versions of the word *professional*. The repetition is deliberate. The core of my counterbalance to Smith's piece is that honors is already a full-fledged professional endeavor; our community of faculty, directors, and deans are already acknowledged professionals; and our institutional units are already professional operations. I would argue that Caplow's developmental stages and criteria concerning the definition of professionalism and Smith's derived conclusion that turning NCHC into a certifying or accrediting body would culminate in legitimatizing its professionalism may work handily in other work settings but adds no value to honors. While Caplow's theory, now more than a half-century old, provided astute analysis of patriarchy's damage to women and society, his *Sociology of Work* primarily addressed how the stages of developing professionalism play out in groups such as those identified in the book's contents: "occupational institutions," "labor market," "labor union," "women," "family." To apply his schema to the contemporary, dynamic realities of honors or academia in general is forced and flawed, especially if we narrow our response to the primary honors mission of exemplary teaching and learning. Let me explain.

Caplow's framework for distinguishing a "professional" individual or organization is closely allied to economic theories about free-market structures of privilege and power; it may be relevant to business, law, medicine, or other fields of labor or industry, but it runs counter to what lies at the heart of education and especially honors. While a market-driven sales company, bank,

hospital, engineering firm, or law office might apply Caplow's theory with some success, academic disciplines and educational institutions are guided (or should be) by very different values and methodologies. To highlight the contrast, consider the ubiquitous language of entrepreneurialism: power, hierarchy, management, control, clientele, transaction, efficiency, accountability, certification. Education uses a very different lexicon: knowledge, competence, respect, collaboration, risk, ethics, reflection, experimentation, responsibility, review, integrity, freedom.

Smith's argument, couched in Caplow's ideas, rests on the supposition that honors has evolved over the past ninety-plus years from a nascent educational movement focused on distinct teaching and learning approaches for high-ability students—implied by Smith to be nonprofessional—to one that is now ready to professionalize in ways that require specialization, organizational oversight, systematic evaluation, credentialing, and restrictive “occupational barriers.” I have my own strong views about assigning the characteristics named by Caplow to any assessment of honors as a bona fide profession or about defining honors as a discipline that requires some form of hierarchical, standardized judgment of approval for legitimacy and membership, but I leave the sociological, economic, and operational arguments to others with more knowledge in those areas. Since my interests and expertise lie more squarely in the essential areas of teaching and learning—what I consider the heart and soul of honors education and the NCHC as an organization—my response to Smith's essay focuses on teaching and learning as a genuinely professional endeavor when performed authentically in the experimental, creative, and subversive spirit that underlies honors pedagogy and that is shared with a community of scholars through professional activities and publications.

Grounded in contemporary models of the “scholarship of teaching and learning” (SOTL), my view is that professionalism in teaching and learning comes from several imperatives: 1) the authority of expertise within a community of practice; 2) the benefits of applying descriptive and analytical research methodology to the improvement of teaching and learning; 3) the power of interdependent knowledge and collaboration; 4) the generative value of critical reflection; and 5) the advancement of the field through the composition and dissemination of peer-reviewed scholarship. These hallmarks of SOTL apply directly to effective honors teaching and learning. Both SOTL and honors are uniquely professional and worthy of the same prestige and rewards that are widely attributed to research in siloed disciplinary

structures, where teaching and service all too often are relegated to secondary levels of importance. To teach and learn well in honors, the instructors need to adopt a transformed philosophy and practice of teaching while at the same time students need to be willing and able to develop their talents and skills in different, more challenging ways. The work that we find, for instance, in NCHC's *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, *Honors in Practice*, and the stellar monograph series—all first-rate, scholarly, refereed publications—is testimony to the high degree of professionalism and achievement in honors teaching and learning.

Ernest Boyer et al., in *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (2016), reconsider the traditional “priorities of the professoriate,” placing the kinds of pedagogical innovation, analysis, review, and distributed scholarship that we find in SOTL and in honors on a par with the demands of professionalism in recognized specific disciplines and in the professoriate at large. Major fields in the academy such as English, psychology, biology, history, and others have endorsed the primacy of teaching as a facet of comprehensive faculty scholarship. A noteworthy observation is that such disciplines’ various professional organizations have appropriate *standards*, like NCHC’s “Basic Characteristics,” but none of them functions to promote *standardization* as a certifying or accrediting body. Academic disciplines have now embraced the lessons of the SOTL movement in higher education, recognizing the importance of teaching and learning as a scholarly enterprise. Honors education, having recognized and valorized the scholarship of teaching and learning from its beginnings, has long since proved itself a legitimate professional venture.

Professionalism—especially in the foundational realm of teaching and learning but also in the ways we regard and respect our diverse programs and colleges—is a concept that is continually constructed and shaped by the inspiration and influence of common values, collaboration, communities of expertise and practice, and agreed-upon standards. Professionalism should not be defined by standardized codes of operation, exclusionary “occupational barriers,” privileged stamps of approval, specialized and hierarchical organizational structures, or reductive rubrics—all features that I fear would accompany buying into any vision of certification. Just as teaching and learning at their best—at the level we call “honors”—are dynamic, individual, creative, and subversive endeavors that involve the rigorous professionalism of SOTL and other current movements in higher education, so should everything we do in the NCHC reflect our commitment to the lexicon that

sustains our special community and not its opposite, the divisive language of certification.

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